

Watanabe Nobukazu (1872-1944)

Japan

Kōi godairei no zu (Picture of Noble's Imperial Ceremony)

1900, Meiji period (1868-1912)

color woodcut

Right panel 37 x 25 cm, center panel 37 x 25 cm, left panel 36 x 25 cm

Museum purchase: Lucy Shaw Schultz Fund

2002.0205 a,b,c

Essay by Alison Miller

In 1868, after a brief and bloodless coup, Japan reinstated the emperor as the political leader of the nation. For hundreds of years prior, the emperor held a symbolic figurehead position, but was not directly involved with national rule. Many believed that he was the direct descendent of Amaterasu, the Sun Goddess and a central deity in the Shinto religion, and as such the Imperial Household held an air of religious authority throughout Japanese history. Yet, as the emperor was not a public figure and images of the emperor were banned prior to the Meiji period (1868-1912), this religious and symbolic role was not widely seen among the citizenry. With the shift to the modern nation state at the start of the Meiji period, Emperor Meiji became not only a political ruler, but also took on the role of a father figure and religious leader of the nation, all of which were depicted in popular, affordable, and widely distributed woodblock prints.

Due to the affiliation of the emperor with the Shinto religion, this print, which may seem to be purely political or ceremonial to contemporary viewers, held a religious function in the context of Shinto in the Meiji period. Shinto is a Japanese religion which has a long history in ritual practice, much of which was codified in the eighth century. For most of its history it was a relatively decentralized religion, something which changed greatly in the nineteenth century with the restoration of imperial rule, the centralization of shrines, and the combination of the religion with state politics. Shinto belief is focused around *kami*, or deities, many of whom reside in

places of natural beauty, or are related to ancestral spirits. Of the over 80,000 *kami* believed to inhabit the Japanese archipelago, many are local deities, and only a few are of national recognition or significance. Amaterasu, the Sun Goddess and imperial ancestor, is one of these central *kami*. Other Shinto practices include worship at shrines, giving offerings to the *kami*, participating in purification rituals, displaying amulets in the home, and taking part in *matsuri*, or festivals, many of which relate to fertility and harvest. Shinto does not have a core text, and practitioners do not regularly attend group services. It is generally confined to Japan and the Japanese archipelago. Throughout its long history, Shinto has blended with Buddhism, the other dominant religion of Japan, and in some instances it is impossible to separate fully the ritual and traditions of the two religions. During the Meiji period, however, there were attempts to do just that, with Shinto receiving state support and Buddhism being persecuted as a “foreign” religion.

Although the vague title of this triptych print, *Picture of Noble's Imperial Ceremony*, does not give a direct clue about the content, a few visual, textual, and historical cues allow for further interpretation. At the bottom left corner a small inscription tells us that the date of this ceremony was the 23rd day of the 3rd month of Meiji 33 (1900). The year Meiji 33 was important for the Japanese Imperial Family, as it marked the wedding ceremony of the Meiji Emperor's son and successor, Crown Prince Yoshihito. The wedding took place on the 10th day of the 5th month, but prior to the ceremony, many smaller formal events took place. As documented in Donald Keene's 2002 biography of the sovereign, *Emperor of Japan: Meiji and His World*, on March 23, the date of this print, the crown prince underwent health examinations to insure his physical health was strong enough for marriage. Yoshihito endured serious illness only five years earlier, and experienced a difficult recovery. His doctors and the court entourage determined on March 23 that he was indeed fit for marriage, and this print may be related to this decision. The

marriage and expectation of subsequent children was important to carrying on the unbroken imperial lineage, which many traced to the Sun Goddess Amaterasu, and as such the event may have called for a ritual marking the preparation for the passage of both religious and political rule to the crown prince. Various court ceremonies, such as the one that this image presents, were newly fabricated during the Meiji period, and their public display was an innovation of the modern era. As the state attempted to gain the support of the populace, court rites and rituals, as well as publically distributed images and descriptions of them, were intended to arouse national pride, unity, and a loyalty to the crown. In addition to court images, *bunmei kaika-e*, or “pictures of civilization and enlightenment,” presented modern brick buildings, iron bridges, and newly constructed railroads as evidence of a successful government and theocracy. All of this imagery worked in tandem to fashion an image of nationalism under the watchful and protective eye of the emperor.

The two figures in the middle ground of the image, the Crown Prince Yoshihito and his fiancée Kūjo Sadako, sit in formal court attire as they are waited upon by three women in traditional Japanese dress. The Emperor Meiji and his wife Empress Shōken look on in the background, along with various noblemen that flank the imperial couple. At the far left, small flower buds on a tree remind the viewer of the Japanese natural landscape, as well as providing a seasonal reference to the spring, while large bonsai pine frame the emperor and empress, showing the time-honored wealth of the court, and acting as an auspicious symbol of longevity. The mixture of costume tells viewers a great deal about the invention of tradition in the Meiji period. The military dress that the court males wear was inspired by the uniforms of the armed forces of Europe. When Japan opened to the outside world in the mid-nineteenth century, government officials were forced to sign a series of unequal treaties, documents which were not

fully reversed until 1899. Throughout the late nineteenth century, as Japan worked to gain equal political footing with Europe and America, they adopted various Western customs with the intention of proving civility. One example of this is the military costume of the men in *Picture of Noble's Imperial Ceremony*. The high Victorian fashion of Empress Shōken and the future Crown Princess Kūjo Sadako was inspired by the popular Parisian fashions of the day which were worn by female royalty the world over. Contrasted with these up-to-date European clothes are the traditional costumes of the three women kneeling in the foreground. The loose-fitting red pants, or *hakama*, worn by the women indicate their affiliation with the Shinto religion, and their religious function at court. Rituals such as those represented in *Picture of Noble's Imperial Ceremony* were based upon historic court observances, but with the new function of solidifying and supporting the message of State Shinto—that the Emperor was the father of the nation and the leader of the Shinto religion, as well as the de facto political leader of Japan.

The designer of this triptych, Watanabe Nobukazu, was a popular woodblock print artist of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries who was well known for his images of the Imperial Household, as well as depictions of national ceremonies and war. Trained under Toyohara Chikanobu (1838-1912), one of the most famous of the Meiji period woodblock print artists, Nobukazu worked in various genres and frequently represented views of the modernization of Tokyo. In this image he used the bright aniline, or chemical, dyes that were recently introduced to Japan. The vibrant reds, pinks, and purples of *Picture of Noble's Imperial Ceremony* were popular in their day and common to Meiji period woodblock prints. In addition to these industrially produced colors, the large number of blocks used in the print show a high level of technical development indicative of the modern period. In a print such as this one, each color is applied with a different block, and all are matched with a key block; some prints required

as many as fifty or more blocks. Contrasting with the modern elements, the tin dust that gives extra shimmer to the silver areas of the print was created with a historic technique in which paste was applied to the paper, and metallic dust painted onto a block, and then affixed to the print. Also, the general medium of woodblock prints evoked tradition; in the early twentieth century other media such as photography and lithography were encroaching on the subjects historically presented in woodblock. As such, much like the blend of historic and modern subject matter, the mix of techniques points to the hybrid modernity of Japan at the turn of the twentieth century.

Picture of Noble's Imperial Ceremony provides the contemporary viewer with a glimpse of the opulence and elegance of court life in 19th century Japan. Depicting the emperor's complimentary roles as a religious and political leader, and showcasing the hybrid visual styles of the turn of the century, this print truly embodies the spirit of divine inspiration.

Bibliography

- Fujitani, Takashi. *Splendid Monarchy: Power and Pageantry in Modern Japan*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998.
- Keene, Donald. *Emperor of Japan: Meiji and His World, 1868-1912*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2002.
- Meech-Pekarik, Julia. *The World of the Meiji Print: Impressions of a New Civilization*. New York: Weatherhill, 1986.
- Merritt, Helen. "Woodblock Prints of the Meiji Era." In *The Hotei Encyclopedia of Japanese Woodblock Prints*, edited by Amy Reigle Newland, 241-260. Amsterdam: Hotei Publishing, 2005.
- Museum of Fine Arts Boston. *Japan at the Dawn of the Modern Age: Woodblock Prints from the Meiji Era*. Boston: MFA Publications, 2001.